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The need to approach knowledge and action throught the structures of language requires consideration of the forms of communication. Talk can bring out the context-bound, partial, and tentative nature of educational knowledge (as well as practical, personal, and theoretical knowledge); it can make people aware of their various commitments and help them to see that educational research itself often aims to persuade. While dramatic, forceful, and historically dominant, the argumentative model is predicated upon a military analogy, with victory superseding goals of understanding, including sensitivity and openness to alternative views. Conversation, by contrast, encourages participation, and it accepts stories, feelings, and other contributions that do not conform to the demands of traditional logical rigor. Awareness of conversation's limitations is crucial, however, and helps ward off erratic and facile tendencies of conversation. Still, in being more flexible and more compatible with the conditions of effective persuasion, yet capable of incorporating stretches of argument in an encompassing "romance of reason," the conversational model offers a more inclusive approach to addressing questions of knowledge, understanding, and action. (Forty-three references are attached.) (Author/RS)

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Occasional Paper 136

REASON AND ROMANCE IN ARGUMENT AND CONVERSATION

Margret Buchmann

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Abstract

The need to approach knowledge and action through the structures of language requires consideration of the forms of communication. While dramatic, forceful, and historically dominant, the argumentative model is predicated upon a military analogy, with victory superseding goals of understanding, including sensitivity and openness to alternative views. Conversation, by contrast, encourages participation, and it accepts stories, feelings, and other contributions that do not conform to the demands of traditional logical rigor. Awareness of conversation's limitations is crucial, however, and helps ward off erratic and facile tendencies of conversation. Still, in being more flexible and more compatible with the conditions of effective persuasion, yet capable of incorporating stretches of argument, the conversational model offers a more inclusive approach to addressing questions of knowledge, understanding, and action.

REASON AND ROMANCE IN ARGUMENT AND CONVERSATION[1]

Margret Buchmann[2]

> In this network of arguments and reflections we seem to be moving along a razor's edge--like tightrope walkers--almost as though we were on the point of falling, on the one side into triumphant, non-dialogical discourse, and on the other into a state of irremediable passivity. In both cases we would be victims of a kind of ideological hypnosis.
>
> Gemma Corradi Fiumara, The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening

Why Talk in Education?

There is no direct route to knowledge or social action, no route that steers clear of what people say and imagine. Action and knowledge cannot be determined by impartial adherence to rules of evidence and scientific method alone. Talk can bring out the context-bound, partial, and tentative nature of educational knowledge (and this holds for practical, personal, and theoretical knowledge alike); it can make people aware of their various commitments and help them to see that educational research itself often aims to persuade (Floden, 1985).

People talk because knowledge is uncertain, because the outcomes of action are ambiguous, because their interests and beliefs differ--and because they need to learn. With different stakes in the outcomes of action and some sense that inferences from the data are rarely clear, people speculate on the course of events after the fact, connect and isolate incidents, question supposed proofs, dispute the relevance and value of evidence, and tell each other stories. The discourse approach to knowledge use in education and other areas of public concern fits with both the uncertainties of knowledge and the

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fact that people's actions proceed from their many differences. If people put aside attempts to eliminate fallibility or bolster their credibility, it seems that everyone can learn (see Cronbach et al., 1980).

Conditions for "Sweetness and Light"

People have ample reason to talk, but words can veil facts and feelings and serve those in power as well as clarify knowledge claims and grounds for action. If discourse is to contribute to greater justice and understanding, "all interested parties must be able to initiate discussion, to establish or influence the rules of conversation, to put forward statements, to request elaboration and clarification, and to call other statements into question" (Cohen & Garet, 1975, pp. 42-43). To meet requirements for a democratic organization of discourse, all participants must distance themselves from authoritative views of knowledge and they must listen. While the first step toward learning may therefore be silence, requirements for justification must also be met. When errors are likely and feelings conflicting, it does not follow that anything goes: A proliferation of delusions is not learning.

In groups with diverse participants, the processes and outcomes of discourse can easily drift away from what is true, right, or better. Where people do not appeal to such standards, talking may simply reinforce existing misconceptions and inequalities. And where interests conflict, there are few incentives for giving up recognized power and status. The cumulative effects of past patterns of participation are also resistant to change; thus, for instance,

> the habits developed through past interactions between researchers and teachers will not incline teachers to ask questions. Their expectation is to be told what research has found to be true, not to raise questions about why they should believe research claims. (Floden, 1985, p. 31)

Nor can a democratic organization of discourse make people equally good at talking, let alone understanding.

Explaining what one takes for granted is difficult, especially when one's audience is inclined to be puzzled or dismissive. People aiming to learn from each other must therefore have particular strengths and abilities. They need to be honestly attentive, flexible and firm, and somewhat detached from their given states of mind. Over time, participants will have to work out rules about what sorts of talk are appropriate for what purposes. Yet norms of communication are already working and in place; they flow from the life and work of people and the way talk tends to serve their goals. Language works differently in different groups, is about different things, and aims at different outcomes, for instance, either to clarify things--testing logical consistency and entailments--or to get them done.

Words With Power?

The notion of improving education by talking depends on a belief that one can do things with words, a belief that not all people share and that is only partially true. Words have limited powers, and expansive articulation has involved relations to morality and knowledge. Quiet attention furthers learning. Tact, caution, and kindness demand that much remain unsaid. On the other hand, spelling out one's underlying sense of the good in clear and descriptive language helps others and oneself to see and examine one's life. On this ancient perspective, logic and linguistic articulacy almost define being human:

> We aren't full beings in this perspective until we can say what moves us, what our lives are built around. . . . The central notion here is that articulation can bring us closer to the good as a moral source, can give it power. (Taylor, 1989, p. 92)

Making lucid articulation central to human being and goodness gives a special place to academics. But capacities for analysis do not in themselves enhance one's scope of vision or contribute to what Aristotle termed "greatness of soul": thinking well of others and being hopeful as well as capable of laughter. Moreover, the ability to give precise conceptual utterance--identifying clearly recognizable elements of an idea and tracing the provenance and usages of concepts--will not in itself remove conflict or confusion. One may believe that philosophers, in the words of Rorty (1982),

> know what is going on, in a way in which these people who don't know the genealogy of the terms, or phrases, cannot. This is a non sequitur. If a physician is torn between respect for the dignity of her patient and the need to minimize his pain, she is not confused on matters which the philosopher . . . is clear about. Being articulate is a virtue, but it is not the same as eliminating confusion, the attainment of clarity. (p. 223)

The patient's and doctor's troubles are not created by a lack of analytic skills, nor susceptible to logical resolutions. The dilemma does not yield to explication or learned little lectures. Listening, rather than talking, may help the doctor to find "words with power" and the necessary silences: to comfort and be present, consider what is known, discern the needs of the patient, and look into her own heart. No outcomes of articulacy, "being there" and "noticing things" are central to morality and learning.

Trusting reliance on verbal illumination is somewhat naive. Can criticism and public debate, for instance, be free and blind with regard to social authority and personal interest (Popper, 1972)? The willingness to be proven wrong, over and over again, and impartial attention to the merits of a case, no matter where it comes from, presuppose a distinctive purity of motives and capaciousness of mind. Mill (1840/1962) was not sanguine about the process and outcomes of debate among people who differ:

> In truth, a system of consequences from an opinion, drawn by an adversary, is seldom of much worth. Disputants are rarely sufficiently masters of each other's doctrines, to be good judges of what is fairly deducible from them, or how a consequence which seems to flow from one part of the theory may or may not be defeated by another part. (pp. 130-131)

To think of knowledge use as equitable and enlightening discourse may be desirable and inspiring, but how well founded is this conception? I will consider this question by comparing argument and conversation, examining presuppositions, limits, and relations of both approaches to communication.

Control and Progress Through Arguments?

When social scientists regard arguments and rationally motivated consensus as the best way to legitimate and successful reforms, they believe that talk can uncover assumptions and values that shape and distort the production and use of knowledge (see Dunn, 1982). I have already mentioned some reasons why talk will not always illuminate; silence as "the other side of language" (Fiumara, 1990) is obviously important. Nor is consensus always rationally motivated, especially in attempts at social change. And does the better argument have a peculiar force? Perhaps, but so have the memories of people and the anecdotes they hear.

Arguments at their best move critically and efficiently in the realm of concepts within systems of deliberated thought. They involve opponents, testable claims, and rules of cool reasoning. Social reforms, however, have to do with "practical imagining," which aims to fill the world with things we both desire and approve (Oakeshott, 1959/1962). Moral sentiments are established by custom and tested by time, while people are supposed to mind them; take care to remember, for instance, the kinds of concerns and dispositions their clients and the public have a right to expect of doctors

and teachers. Thus, we cannot account for social improvements by the powers of arguments alone. Good sense and feeling are also necessary.

People determine what to do about problems of individual and social life based on the information available to them, personal beliefs, and traditions. Popper (1962) emphasizes tradition--in point of quality and quantity--as "by far the most important source of our knowledge. . . . Most things we know we have learned by example, by being told, by reading books, by learning how to criticise, how to take and accept criticism, how to respect truth" (p. 56). While this fact makes antitraditionalism futile, it does not entail taking a passive attitude toward tradition. Of all the multitudinous things we have absorbed implicitly, however, only some can be brought to awareness and even fewer tested as to their full and fair grounding. In many ways, people keep each other company, wandering in the dark; as Locke (1690/1959) wrote three centuries ago,

> Who almost is there that hath the leisure, patience, and means to collect together all the proofs concerning most of the opinions he has, so as safely to conclude that he hath a clear and full view; and that there is no more to be alleged for his better information? And yet we are forced to determine ourselves on the one side or other. The conduct of our lives, and the management of our great concerns, will not bear delay: for those depend, for the most part, on the determination of our judgment in points wherein we are not capable of certain and demonstrative knowledge. (p. 371)

Locke concludes that our shared ignorance calls for "friendship, in the diversity of opinions" (p. 372) and "the gentle and fair ways of information" (p. 373). Where people argue, instead, for the sake of winning, arguments can distort the facts and mislead intentions, just as unexamined beliefs can do.

Though some consensus is necessary for social reform, it is not true that arguments make their distinctive contributions to the agreement of people with one another, enabling them to act. Other limitations of argument as a

discourse model of knowledge use derive from the influence of argumentative rules on subject matter (not everything on people's minds is discussable), from hierarchical relations (differences in power and status), and from the outcomes one can expect when people are contestants, fighting for different things and wrangling for victory with a certain cold hardness.

Argument is a dress rehearsal of speech with its own dramatic purposes; its performance requirements determine chances of success. Moreover, differences in power, status, and skills already count when people settle what should be discussed; not every group has what it takes to make a social problem an issue of public notice and debate. It is useful to recall that disputation flourished in the Middle Ages, when crucial issues--such as what is true and right or who is entitled to power and rewards--had already been settled, as it were, out of court. Social predestination and unequal patterns of participation are factors still present.

Contemporary philosophers and social theorists nevertheless show faith in the redeeming power of argument. Thus Habermas (1973; Habermas & Luhmann, 1971) posits an ideal speech situation undistorted by power and interests; he makes the strange claim that beliefs capable of legitimating action can be formed only under conditions of absolutely free and unlimited debate. If one took this seriously, one would have to write off most things people do as either unjustified or unjustifiable. Neither is public debate likely to expose scientific error. People find it difficult to understand why scientists take only some evidence seriously (Polanyi, 1967), and scientists pay little attention to notions they find lacking in rigor or otherwise distasteful (Boring, 1929/1963).

Argument as an Adversarial Practice

People are more just to their own, whether kith and kin or ideas. A lack of impartiality limits the viability of an argument model of knowledge use when people differ not only in opinions, but in power, status, and the requisite skills. For argumentative fencing depends on verbal agility and vigilance, on guarding oneself while carrying devastation into the enemy's camp by cross-examination and logical blows. The use of mind is strategic and tactical, and the name of the game is war:

> We don't just talk about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. . . . It is in this sense that the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor is one that we live by in this culture; it structures the actions we perform in arguing. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4)

Arguments among different people are likely to draw on different kinds of knowledge, yet the party winning the battle may not have the best knowledge or intentions. Distinct from wisdom and sensitivity, levels of sophistication shape argumentative outcomes, and the possession of a special or latinized vocabulary strengthens one's position--regardless of whether its use is informative, ornamental, or coercive. Meehl's (1971) hierarchical example makes this vivid:

> The parish priest can refute the theological objections of an unlettered Hausfrau parishioner. The priest, in turn, will lose a debate with the intellectual village atheist. C. S. Lewis will come out ahead of the village atheist. But when C. S. Lewis tangles with Bertrand Russell, it gets pretty difficult to award the prizes. (p. 71)

All down the line, rich or well-founded ideas do not guarantee winning the dispute; and someone who maintains an attitude of openness in questioning and seeking truth may come off worse (see Gadamer, 1965/1975, p. 330). Hence,

appearing defeated in an argument may not be a good reason to give up practices or beliefs.

We have no reason to assume that warm feelings, buried premises, oblique references, and beliefs that are inarticulate must be associated with indefensible ideas or lines of action. Argument models of knowledge use equate the love of clarity and argument with the pursuit of wisdom--a confusion that stems from the beginnings of philosophy. The continuity of argument models of knowledge use with the classic and medieval tradition of disputation is a genuine continuity, too, in that the way of argument is seldom that of the mother tongue. People can be shrewd and, for that matter, right without mastering argumentative moves or feeling confined by them. While some commitments are too elusive and firmly engrained for debates, they can steady people in their pursuit of truth or goodness. On the other hand, an absence of intellectual curiosity, vigorous sensitivity, and ethical circumspection is compatible with acuteness and success in argument. We cannot equate wanting to say things with wanting to discover them.

Romance and Illusions Surrounding Arguments

Rorty (1982) stresses the difference between the love of argument and the pursuit of wisdom, maintaining that adversarial modes of discourse substitute the goal of winning for that of understanding, while fostering illusions of professorial competence. People whose academic socialization has taught them to despise history as well as stories may take some pride in being keen and clever. Yet the self-esteem and public image of academics must be adjusted to what they actually learn and practice. If philosophy professors, for instance, "were traditionally thought of as wise because they were believed to have read and experienced much, traveled far in the realms of

thought, pondered the great problems which have always troubled the human spirit" (p. 221), this contemplative image has vanishing foundations.

In the argumentative mode, thought turns upon itself with little mercy; this is the proof of its incisive quality. "A clear logical conscience," says Peirce (1877/1955), "does cost something--just as any virtue, just as all that we cherish, costs us dear" (p. 21); this notwithstanding,

> the genius of a man's logical method should be loved and reverenced as his bride, whom he has chosen from all the world. . . . She is the one that he has chosen, and he knows that he was right in making that choice [emphasis added]. And having made it, he will work and fight for her . . . and will strive to be the worthy knight and champion of her from the blaze of whose splendours he draws his inspiration and his courage. (pp. 21-22)

Somewhat startling but instructive, Peirce's fervent phrases carry us into realms of chivalry, romance, and noble virtue, in hopes that (pure) logos will be glorious in the end. The story of knights and maidens in their castles--of fearless endurance crowned by the yielding of the (pure) object of desire--has, of course, transcendent and consoling appeal. But it does not follow that this elevating story is true, or that its inspiration and lessons have much of an application to the seeking, gaining, and using of knowledge.

A rapturous monogamy of the mind--being wedded to logic and argumentation as the purifying, right method--may not yield its rewards in terms of good sense or good science. In his historical work on the discipline of psychology, Boring (1929/1963) concludes that people's halting progress toward understanding needs overconfidence and batlike blindness as well as Peirce's clear logical conscience. He warns that a scientist must not "be the judge too often, for then the assured, prejudiced, productive personality might get 'squeezed out,' and science would be the loser" (p. 83). Knowledge in itself and for the social world cannot depend on the aspirations of

argument alone. Pure reasoning may not be faultless. While argumentation brings virtues into play, its heroics can be divisive, restrictive, and punitive. Besides, people who seem hard-headed can be obtuse and given to gratifying illusions. What is sacrificed by argument and for its purposes may be central to action and learning. For reason to realize its modest rewards, it must negotiate the dark and unnerving terrain between people:

> This terrain is uneven, full of sudden faults and dangerous passages where accidents can and do happen, and crossing it, or trying to, does little or nothing to smooth it out to a level, safe, unbroken plain, but simply makes visible its clefts and contours. (Geertz, 1986, p. 119)

Conversation, Silence, and the Spirit of Life

If convincing other people is the aim, subduing them by argument is often a poor means. For one cannot convince others of something without knowing their ways of thinking, including how they have reached their conclusions. Such matters are found out by listening, not talking, and may require a delayed response or no response at all; thus a young man reflects:

> My education was all a preparation for a certain mental virtuosity, a very hard, clear, reasoned way of thinking, and examining evidence, and defending a logical position. I was taught to regard anybody who didn't bear the hall-mark of this training as wooly-minded and half-educated. It's a useful training in its way as far as it goes. But. . . .
>
> You can argue the hind leg off a donkey, but that won't teach you any more about donkeys. Whatever method you may have used in forming your own opinions, you must understand other people's methods before you can hope to get anyone to agree with you. You'll never induce a man to change his mind by making him look silly. You merely put his back up. (Kennedy, 1936/1967, p. 300)

Implacable or evasive, silence can increase distance. It can signal boredom, yet also an expectant openness or kinship and affection beyond words. Silence can mean contempt as well as revealing attention. "A person who simply listens is possibly not much, but he is not isolated in the sense that he is connected once again to a network of vivid, moving and complex dynamics"

(Fiumara, 1990, p. 61). Martin Buber (1929/1947) notes that--just as eager talking does not entail communication--so silence can be speaking; and actually finding a listener who matches one's own thoughts tone by tone can paradoxically turn one's own assertions into questions. Hence, attacks are not always needed for boundaries of understanding to recede.

Talkers often delude themselves about the implications of silence. If listeners seem unable to answer or challenge them, this need not mean that they have given way or changed their minds. In being evasive, softness can be unyielding. If one is busy finding holes in what other people are saying or is eager to score a point, what one can learn is restricted by these purposes. Thus, one is also not likely to change one's mind. In either case, if the knowledge being offered is valuable and unequally shared, these outcomes are disappointing. They also throw doubt on the belief that arguments will uniquely contribute to equity and learning.

Far from representing an undistorted speech situation, the concept of argument may be an emblem of group differences. Arguments import their own distortions--adversarial attitude, goal substitution (winning instead of understanding), censorship--into discourse. Fiumara (1990) suggests that these distortions involve dominating and defensive responses to the abundance and unruliness of life; trying to construct a theoretical or conceptual net from which nothing can escape is a "relentless battle . . . as an attempt . . . to organize everything in the light, or shadow, of the 'best' principles of knowledge: a chronic struggle of territorial conquest" (p. 21). Thus, Wittgenstein (1980) recalls that, in the course of their conversations, Russell would often exclaim: "Logic's hell!":

> I believe our main reason for feeling like this was the following fact: that every time some new linguistic phenomenon occurred to

> us, it could retrospectively show that our previous explanation was unworkable. (We felt that language could always make new, and impossible, demands; and that this made all explanation futile.) (p. 30e)

This sense of defeat and futility stems from the conquering pretensions of argument: the heroic struggles of logic and lucidity. "In the annals of philosophy the hope of mental control of the Absolute recurs in the euphorias of fearless reason and dies in melancholy skepticism" (Kolakowski, 1972/1989, p. 54). Heroes stand alone, seeing others in their own light.

The Pastoral Romance of Conversation

The move from argument to conversation involves shifting metaphorical grounds from battlefields to country meadows, where disorder need not be rebelliousness. We pass from romances featuring strong (though not silent) heroes to the company of ordinary people, "trivial and irreplaceable," as Martin Buber (1929/1947, p. 35) calls them. Conversation is no intellectual privilege: "It does not begin in the upper story of humanity. It begins no higher than where humanity begins" (p. 35). Like life, conversation can be busy with many things and vibrant with a sense of different directions. Conversation is close to the comic spirit which embraces people's frailty and tolerant laughter and allows for emotional release.

If conversations are uniting and disarming, they can still inspire apprehension and do not divest communication of its formidable character. Nor is emotional release a deliverance from pain, for we have feelings about what we value: things we desire and rightly fear to lose. Hence, emotions such as fear, grief, love, and anger

> are webs of connection and acknowledgment [emphasis added], linking the agent with the worth of the unstable context of objects and persons in which human life is lived. Fear involves the belief that there are big important things that may damage us, and that we are powerless. . . . Love involves the ascription of a

> very high value to a being who is separate from the subject and not fully controlled. (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 387)

The other is, for us, "a free being in all personal situations: in trust, in love, in hate, in the bitterness of refusal and the disaster of parting, in the risk of fascination, in submission of rapture, in the pangs of disenchantment" (Kolakowski, 1972/1989, p. 55). Lifting restraints on feelings will remind one of being needy, incomplete, and vulnerable in a general sense; it also keeps one open to grief and reproaches. People's hopes are based on experiences of inadequacy and unbearable separation.

As an expression of life and hope, conversation brings to mind a poetic pastoral, where people have mother wit, the setting is natural and simple, and amiability will carry the day. The hero of pastoral romance is no "exceptionally brave or strong person, but only a modest and pleasant young man[,] . . . a shepherd with no social pretensions, except that he is also a poet and a lover" (Frye, 1967, p. 24). Wordsworth (1800/1904) explains that, in such poetry,

> humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language . . . and, consequently, may be more <u>accurately</u> [emphasis added] contemplated. (p. 791)

Related to this, Wordsworth describes the poet as "a more <u>comprehensive</u> [emphasis added] soul, . . . pleased with his own passions and volitions, and . . . rejoic[ing] more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him" (pp. 793-794).

Acknowledgement, comprehensiveness, and accuracy are related to truth and illumination. Otherwise, there is nothing particularly pure or exalted about conversation. Being less guarded, ideas and feelings collide and mingle

with one another and are diluted, rounded off, and complicated in the process. Conversational tones are rarely steely. People do not insist that partners follow: It is enough that they enter into conversation.

The Charm and Freedom of Conversation

Conversations can be long, intermittent, inconclusive as in marriage, and they are continued in the absence of one's partners. Arguments are driven by hopes of coming to rest upon conclusions, but conversations are not driven at all. To some extent following laws of indirection, they begin with differences or notions often vaguely apprehended and, after a while, do not so much end as are abandoned. Arguments favor the here and now, but conversations assign importance to stories and history.

What makes conversations attractive is their enveloping quality and a capacity for surprising turns. Conversations have flexible rules of relevance, evidence, and progression. Condensing fables and finely detailed observations have their place--and so have stretches of argument. Conversations therefore broaden one's conceptual repertoire and moral imagination. They thrive on readiness of speech and language, yet sidelong glances, repeated starts, and arm-waving allusions are all right.

Although they can be elegant rather than awkward, conversational exchanges are thus not disconcerted by ideals of perfection in clarity, parsimony, and coherence. One may get answers to questions one never thought of asking (but ought to have asked) or have one's answers answered in odd, little gusts of inconsecutive thought that interrupt one's plans and preconceptions. The progress of conversation need not be linear: "Like writing, saying might also go from right to left, or even from bottom to top, from forwards backwards, or in still other directions that we are not even

able to envisage" (Fiumara, 1990, p. 177). But conversations are not mere talk: They presuppose good faith, some common purposes or emergent directions, and the assumptions that people say things they believe to be relevant and will attend (in some fashion) to what others are saying (see Grice, 1975). In short, conversations require being decent and sensible in ways that establish and maintain connections and openness.

While conversations sidestep competition, they are encounters in which the power of mind, good sense, and moral sentiments of a person come to be revealed. As Johnson said, "Men might be very eminent in a profession, without our perceiving any particular power of mind in them in conversation" (Boswell, 1799/1953, p. 1078). In conversation, one listens to persons, not just utterances. Here one comes close to people, to what they know, desire, imagine, and can barely say--and a person who simply listens can be profoundly connected and filled with living force. In the end, silent attention can communicate "the general and surprising apprehension of the precariousness of all language, meaning, knowledge" (Nemerov, 1975/1978, p. 109).

In conversation, people of thought and people of action can please themselves and be true to type, although self-constituted elites or self-impressed individuals will not fare well. One can imagine conversation to be, ideally, like writing at its best, where, as T. S. Eliot (1942/1970) wrote, "every word is at home":

> Taking its place to support the others,
> The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
> An easy commerce of the old and the new,
> The common word exact without vulgarity,
> The formal word precise but not pedantic,
> The complete consort dancing together.
> ("Little Gidding," pp. 207-208)

Practice "is recognized not as an isolated activity but as a partner in a conversation, and the final measure of intellectual achievement is in terms of its contribution to the conversation in which all universes of discourse meet" (Oakeshott, 1959/1962, p. 199). Science likewise need not be anything other than itself: It can speak to the mind and about truth with the understanding that meaning in the realm of science is not that of everyday discourse. Conversations accordingly respect not only differences but the limits of meaning, knowing, and speaking--realistically including some awareness of their own limitations.

Facile and Erratic Tendencies of Conversation

Conversation can yield insights and astonishing connections; yet it cannot establish knowledge. Johnson reminds us that "general principles must be had from books, which, however, must be brought to the test of real life. In conversation, you never get a system" (Boswell, 1799/1953, p. 624). Likewise, if people please themselves and remain true to type, they will be comfortable but vulnerable to denseness and inertia. As Thomas Traherne (1675/1966) put it, "Contentment is a sleepy thing" (p. 146).

Erratic tendencies of conversation are associated with a decline into obscurity and rigidity. If one never examines one's vastly deep convictions, they remain hazy and disconnected; if one never singles out certain things to pursue them, they remain fugitive fancies. Hence, although

> lack of clarity and focus does not preclude useful verbal interchanges, it does make it more difficult to sort the erroneous ideas from the muddled but proper convictions. Doing that requires removing some lack of clarity and filling some gaps in an argument. That takes effort. (Floden, 1985, p. 26)

Tranquil satisfaction with one's doings, thoughts, and feelings can be complacent. If one never presses one's points, one may founder on one's

fallacies and expansive vagaries--or do one's partner the disservice of tolerating what is ill judged or fantastic, though strongly felt. The other side of peaceful acquiescence is passive compliance or submission.

Lack of discrimination verges toward indifference, and in being indifferent, people fail themselves, their partners, and their principles. Differences should not always be smoothed out. Geertz (1986) concludes that "'understanding' in the sense of comprehension, perception, and insight needs to be distinguished from 'understanding' in the sense of agreement of opinion, union of sentiment, or commonality of commitment. . . . We must learn to grasp what we cannot embrace" (p. 122). The admirable George Meredith put it like this in his prelude to The Egoist (1879/1947): "Why, to be alive, to be quick in the soul, there should be diversity in the companion-throbs of your pulses. Interrogate them" (p. 3).

To ward off or delimit facile and erratic tendencies of conversation, one must be alert and distinguish between attention and assent or submission, either indiscriminate or insincere. To submit quietly can be quite wrong. One must insist upon the differences between openness, vacuous tolerance, and eventual repression. In other words, one must take recourse to lucid articulation and argumentation, in addition to listening and silence in conversation. Guarded acceptance can be appropriate. As arguments mislead where they remain impoverished communication, so cozily confirming conversations are vulnerable to a capitulation of reason or to its "dispersive flaking away" (Fiumara, 1990, p. 182). While some monitoring is therefore needed, overwhelming logical measures are not required. Instead, we should attempt a conversational posture "both accepting and critical, trusting and

diffident, irrepressible and yet consoling" (Fiumara, 1990, p. 90). And a little dryness won't hurt.

The Canopy of Conversation

One might conclude that argument and conversation as discourse models of knowledge use are each equally truncated, each being a view of communication reduced by its better half--the first detached from propensities to receive and listen; the second diminished by a waning of principles: "The grey shades of science, laws and principles . . . vanish like a lifeless mist" (Hegel, 1807/1931, p. 385). On this symmetrical proposition, we have light without sweetness and sweetness without light--and the solution seems an equal partnership, as a modern connubial model primly remote from heroic and pastoral romances.

Yet I cannot give much credence to this model. Its symmetry is wanting in ease and freedom; its abstract conception has a gloss that does not reflect the inexplicable and ominous in ordinary experience. Listening to party talk, a protagonist in Virginia Woolf's (1937) novel, The Years, thus slips into a nightmare:

> He felt that he had been in the middle of a jungle; in the heart of darkness; cutting his way towards the light; but provided only with broken sentences, single words, with which to break through the briarbush of human bodies, human wills and voices, that bent over him, binding him, blinding him. (p. 411)

Pretending that all conversational entries can be sorted out by bright arguments fails to admit of impending darkness and fragility and, accordingly, of the need for miracles and grace in communication.

Areas of meaning, Berger (1967) avers, are "carved out of a vast mass of meaninglessness, a small clearing of lucidity in a formless, dark, always ominous jungle" (p. 24); although talking may hold our world together, the

thread of conversation is thin and wavering. In his lyrical poem, "Two in the Campagna," Robert Browning (1855/1895) offers the image of a "floating weft," but he puts his conclusions with a lighter touch, more wonderingly, and with less of a sense of desolation:

> Must I go
> Still like the thistle-ball, no bar,
> Onward, whenever light winds blow,
> Fixed by no friendly star?
>
> Just when I seemed about to learn!
> Where is the thread now? Off again!
> The old trick! Only I discern--
> Infinite passion, and the pain
> Of finite hearts that yearn. (p. 189)

Pitted against the "heart of darkness" is not sheer intellect but hope, not sophistication but a second innocence of reason. "The sense of the congenial, of a genuine human communication . . . comes from the innocent vision at the heart of all human creation and the response to it" (Frye, 1990, pp. 88-89). In the consort of communicative modes, argument cannot be an equal partner, for in its refiner's fire, variations become, again, impurities--"divergencies from some ideal, non-idiomatic manner of speaking" (Oakeshott, 1959/1962, p. 206). On the other hand, conversations can accommodate varieties of voices, including judicious passages of argument. Hence I will opt for conversation as a tender romance of reason, where discourse, shining with warmth from within, holds a promise of congeniality and comfort, if not light. Understanding is no trophy of pride. It is in this spirit, I believe, that Buber (1929/1947) speaks of the "tiny strictness and grace of every day" (p. 36) as the breakthrough in dialogue.

Peirce (1877/1955) concedes that people are not, in the main, logical animals, but rather naturally inclined towards being more hopeful and sanguine than experience and logic would warrant; yet "it is probably of more advantage

to the animal to have his mind filled with pleasing and encouraging visions, independently of their truth" (p. 8). The yields of conversation are different from those of heroic romances: There are no translucent perfections, no transcendent victories. Like life, conversation grants no irreversible clarification. Under its canopy, gifts and risks are commensurate with the scope of conversation. They are the promises and dangers of our kind.

> The reason why most of us are unaware of this precariousness most of the time is grounded in the continuity of our conversation with significant others. The maintenance of such continuity is one of the most important imperatives of social order. (Berger, 1967, p. 17)

There are good reasons for preferring companionable to warlike visions, fallibilism to perfectionism, the middling to the conquering classes and pretensions, hope and tolerant laughter to the cynicism and destruction induced by raging attempts at controlling the "blooming, buzzing confusion" of life. While conversations cannot make them pure, they can make one's fixed thoughts fluid and permeable to the mystery of difference. Auerbach (1946/1953, p. 13) points out that, in the epics of Homer, we are always reminded of the real world which means nothing but itself; ordinary life with its shepherds' huts, washing days, feasts, and palaces must be imagined as <u>enveloping</u> the heroic struggles. Let argument, likewise, be <u>nested</u> in conversation as an encompassing romance of reason, on the understanding that "any story which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern upon something which might otherwise seem intolerably chancy and incomplete" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 87).

To close with the words of a German poet:

It is not good
To let mortal thoughts

Empty the soul. But conversation
Is good, and to say
What the heart means, to hear
Much about days of love
And deeds that have been done.
Friedrich Hölderlin ("Remembrance," 1807/1972, pp. 91, 93)

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